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# Why Becoming a National Treasure Matters: Elite Celebrity Status and Inequality in the UK

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## Abstract

This article presents the first analysis of ‘national treasure’ as a status designation for an elite category of British celebrities who hold a unique position in the Great British hall of fame. The emergence of this status designation is situated in the context of two intersecting processes of cultural change in the post-War period – the rise of celebrity culture and the popularisation of the state honours system. It is proposed that national treasure status results from the accumulation of three interlocking forms of validation: peer, state and media. After reviewing these underpinning forms of validation, we consider one of Britain’s most celebrated national treasures – Dame Judi Dench. The aim is to illustrate empirically the status elevation and sedimentation processes through which particular elite celebrities become national treasures, and the various ways in which they might respond to this status designation. Though the term ‘national treasure’ for many – including those so-designated – may seem a trite term of endearment, we argue that it is in fact an ideological assemblage invested with significance. On the one hand, national treasures help revalidate the notion of the authentic celebrity within an apparently meritocratic system that recognises and rewards talent, hard work and dedication. In a context of a relentlessly bleak news cycle, they are a wholly virtuous expression of the national identity, signifying all that is great about Britain. On the other hand, although national treasures are constructed as being ‘of the people’, by authenticating the underpinning institutional forms of validation, their status transformation contributes to the legitimation and reproduction of status hierarchies, cultural authority and inequality in the UK.

**Keywords:** elites; celebritocracy; meritocracy; national treasure; state honours; status transformation.

## Introduction

A prime example of invented tradition (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2012), the term ‘national treasure’ conjures images of continuity with a distant past connected to the present through invariant rituals, norms and values and virtues. Its usage in British public discourse dates back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century. But as a status designation for British people, it has in fact only come to prominence in the last few decades. This article situates the emergence of the human national treasure in the context of two processes of cultural co-evolution in the post-War period – the rise of celebrity culture and the democratisation of the state honours system. The intersections between celebrity and class have until recently been under researched in celebrity studies (see also Milner, 2010; Tyler & Bennett, 2010). There have been even fewer attempts to locate celebrity within the context of the British state honours system (Inglis, 2010). And recent sociological research on class inequality, including social mobility and entry into the elite cultural sector in the UK, has had surprisingly little to say on celebrity (Dorling, 2018; Friedman & Laurison, 2019; Savage, 2015). Though researchers have begun examining the complex interplay between celebrity and social status, the primary focus is on those towards the bottom of the celebrity hierarchy – the seemingly limitless mushrooming of inauthentic celestoids featuring on reality TV and social media (Allen & Mendick, 2013; Deery & Press, 2017; Wood & Skeggs, 2011).

In what follows, we fill a lacuna in the existing literature by considering an elite within an elite – those few at the pinnacle of the British celebrity who are designated ‘national treasure’. Our aim is to advance understanding of the British celebritocracy through investigating the status elevation and sedimentation processes through which one becomes a national treasure, and the cultural dynamics that give national treasures ideological significance in contemporary Britain. The article is structured in three parts. In the first part, we present our definition of ‘national treasure’ and situate the term’s evolution in the context of cultural change in post-war Britain. Following that, we examine Dame Judi Dench’s transformation into ‘Dench’, one of Britain’s most celebrated national treasures, and consider how she manages this status designation. In the final part, we consider why national treasures matter by analysing their role as ideological assemblages in contemporary Britain.

## **The Celebritocracy: Centring the 'National' in Celebrity Studies**

There is ongoing debate about the social structure of celebrity (Cashmore, 2006; Dyer & McDonald, 1998; Gamson, 1992; Marshall, 1997; Rojek, 2001; Van Krieken, 2012). Standing at the pinnacle of the celebrity star system, the elite status designation of celebrity-icon has been researched from a diversity of perspectives (Leypoldt & Engler, 2010; Phegley & Badia, 2006; Tomaselli & Scott, 2009). Across this body of work, what distinguishes these superstar celebrities is the longevity of their cultural impact. For Eagar and Lindridge (2014, p. 302; see also Holt, 2004), celebrity status is ephemeral and constrained to a specific time period. As such, it can quickly fade away. In contrast, icons have an impact that outlasts cultural change, and may even drive it, their symbolic meaning being adapted and mythologised to fit new cultural contexts and realities (Alexander, 2010).

Much of the existing research foregrounds the transcendent, transnational qualities of celebrity-icons. However, much less research has been conducted on how elite celebrities are also embedded in the specifics of the national cultures that produced them (Couldry, 2001). In this article, it is the national rather than the global that takes precedence. We call that group of British celebrities with the highest national standing and greatest cultural power the celebritocracy. Cannadine (1998, 1999) has demonstrated how the British preoccupation with social class remains pivotal in the shaping of national culture and identity. Understanding the British celebritocracy's cultural power and significance, therefore, requires a close examination of the intersections between celebrity and social class. To provide an empirical focus, we examine the processes through which a select few of Britain's celebritocracy undergo still further status transformation – to become national treasures. In so doing, we argue, they acquire a unique position in the cultural life of the nation.

### **A Class Apart: Living National Treasures**

The official designation of humans as living national treasures is practiced in a select group of countries where legislation has been passed to both formalise and regulate the process. Japan is perhaps the most well-known. Though informally the custom goes back further, it

was the 1950 Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties that formally allowed for the keepers of important 'intangible cultural properties' – for example, drama, music, applied art – as distinct from 'tangible cultural properties' – for example, buildings, pictures, books, sculptures – to be declared Living National Treasures (Hamanaka & Ohmi, 1999). Other countries, including South Korea, France, Romania and the Czech Republic have official systems for recognising custodians of historically significant crafts or traditions. The shared objective across all these systems is the preservation of national cultural heritage and identity in a context of rapid social change. In response to growing international concern about the loss of traditional culture through diminishing practice and the declining interest of successive generations, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) facilitated a series of workshops from 1989-1993 that resulted in the publication of *Guidelines for the Establishment of National 'Living Human Treasures' systems* (UNESCO, 1993/2002). Here, Living Human Treasures are defined as 'persons who possess to a very high degree the knowledge and skills required for performing or re-creating specific elements of the intangible cultural heritage'. The intangible cultural heritage, in turn, is defined as, 'practices and expressions, as well as the knowledge, skills and values associated therewith, that communities and groups recognize as part of their cultural heritage', and that which 'provides communities, groups and individuals with a sense of identity and continuity'. The aim was to encourage all member states to establish and promote such national systems in order to safeguard their intangible cultural heritage. With the adoption of the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* in 2003, the programme was discontinued. But the official practice of designating humans as national or living treasures continues.

The UK government appears not to have embraced UNESCO's challenge to establish an official system to designate living national treasures. There is, however, a powerful national media system that reserves this status designation for eminent British celebrities, who are simultaneously elevated and sedimented as part of the cultural life of the nation. As Barnes (2012, p. 30) notes, 'The Queen of England, advised by her government, appoints knights and peers; the nation at large, by more informal means, appoints national treasures'. We would argue that this informal means of designating human national treasures is no less significant in preserving Britain's intangible cultural heritage.

Yet the intertwined processes of celebration and preservation, particularly when overseen by a class-conscious national media, are always selective and never neutral. The particular philosophies, values and ways of thinking that are prioritised in the national media's designation of living national treasures provides important insights into the role of culture in the systemic reproduction of inequality in British society.

We define a national treasure as a celebrity who has been awarded at the highest level by their peers, honoured at the highest level by the state, and sedimented in the media's affections. The status-affirming consensus between celebrity peers, the state and the national media institutionalises national treasures to the point that they become national institutions in themselves. In an ever-more congested and chaotic entertainment marketplace, the members of this exclusive class apart are celebrated for their gravitas, superseding fashions and fads and transcending their contemporaries in the Great British hall of fame. This term of endearment has a remarkable resonance in contemporary British culture. Yet despite its signification of tradition, the designation of people as national treasures in the UK is largely a 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomenon.

### **The Emergence of a New Elite Celebrity Status Designation**

To trace the cultural invention of national treasures in Britain, we have drawn from the archives of the following British newspapers: *Illustrated London News*; *Daily Express*; *Daily Mail*; *Daily Mirror*; *Daily Telegraph*; *Guardian*; *Times*; *Financial Times*; the *Economist* and, as a point of international comparison, the *New York Times*. In addition, we have utilised the BBC and ITV online archives, which enabled us to track the processes through which a given celebrity is elevated and sedimented as a national treasure across different media. We have also made extensive use of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

Although the national media use of the term for cultural artefacts dates back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, it is not until 1965 that a non-fictional Briton is declared a living national treasure. Appearing in the *Daily Telegraph* under the heading 'She's a National Treasure', an article celebrating the 65<sup>th</sup> birthday of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother states: 'We should appreciate the Queen Mum. A personality like hers is one of the nation's greatest treasures

and long may she continue to serve us' (Hope, 1965, 4<sup>th</sup> August, p16). The press designation of living national treasures continued sporadically throughout the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet it is only in the past two decades that the designation of celebrities as national treasures has become an enduring source of interest in the British national media.

The *Daily Express* ran its first 'National Treasure' competition, in 2002 which was won by the Queen in her Golden Jubilee year. Dame Judi Dench was the runner-up. The British Library and the *Sunday Telegraph* joined forces in 2008 to decide 'Who in Britain deserves to be called a National Treasure?'. Across four categories, the winners were: former Prime Minister, Lady Margaret Thatcher (Public Life); entrepreneur Sir Richard Branson (Innovation and Enterprise); actor Dame Judi Dench (Arts); and natural historian, television presenter and former BBC2 controller Sir Richard Attenborough (Science). The *Observer*, in 2010, recruited readers to compile its own list of national treasures. Though the final outcome of this public vote appears never to have been published, those named in the weekly updates included David Attenborough and Judi Dench (*Observer*, 21<sup>st</sup> November: 45). In 2011, the Euromillions Millionaire Raffle group commissioned a nationwide poll to determine Britain's 'greatest living national treasure': the winner was Sir David Attenborough. The same year, BBC Radio 4 broadcast a one-hour documentary called *Make me a National Treasure*, in which presenter Gyles Brandreth 'discovers what it takes to become a national treasure and achieve the cultural status of figures like... Sir [sic] Alan Bennet, Sir David Attenborough, Dame Judi Dench' (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b018gqz5>). The media preoccupation with 'national treasures' was such that in 2013 British satirical magazine *Private Eye* started its own column, *National Treasures*, poking fun at what it viewed as the increasingly frequent and indiscriminate use of the term. BBC's Comic Relief 2015 featured a sketch in which various celebrities had to persuade a fictional *British Board of National Treasures* that they should be declared a National Treasure. Despite its obvious popular currency, this important British status designation remains under-researched.

## **The Ultimate Honour? The Cultural Invention of National Treasures in Britain**

We situate the emergence of the status designation of celebrities as national treasures in Britain within the context of two cultural transformations – the rise of celebrity culture and the reform of the state honours system. Though ongoing over decades, these transformations were particularly focused in two distinct time periods: the 1960s and the 1990s. Individually, and in different ways, they appeared to reshape the class structure of post-War Britain, providing a powerful signifier of British cultural identity in a context of dramatic social change.

In the immediate post-War period there was a step-change in the nature and significance of celebrity because of transformations in media and consumer society (Cashmore, 2006; Rojek, 2001). The rise of consumer culture reflected a new post-War understanding of class position as fluid and temporary, where the pre-War generation had understood it as fixed and immutable (Hennessy, 2006; Kynaston, 2015). An ideology of meritocratic social mobility was reinforced by an emerging advertising industry that relentlessly promoted the idea that social progress in the form of wealth, status and success could be demonstrated through the acquisition and consumption of material goods (Cashmore, 2006). With the spectacular collision of mass media entertainment, advertising and consumerism, the lifestyles of a growing class of British celebrities achieved a higher profile (Simonelli, 2013).

Until the mid-1960s, Britain's expanding celebrity system retained its own unique hierarchies and forms of status distinction. While in the USA the route to elite celebrity status was Hollywood stardom, in Britain it was triumph in the theatre and the performing arts (Billington, 2007). The British celebritocracy was populated by classically trained thespians – for example, John Gielgud, Peggy Ashcroft, Ellen Terry, Edith Evans, and Laurence Olivier – who had forged successful theatrical careers and whose fame was based not only on media recognition, but, crucially, on peer and state validation of their talent and achievement in the form of awards and honours.

### *Peer Validation*

Peer validation is the first major form of distinction underwriting national treasure status. In recognition of his achievements, for example, Sir Laurence Olivier became the first artistic director of the newly established National Theatre of Great Britain in 1963, and in the 1970s the Olivier Theatre, within the National, was named in his honour (Rosenthal, 2013). The importance of peer validation grew steadily throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as a growing number of industry/peer-based awards ceremonies – for example, Academy Awards, BAFTAs, Ivor Novello Awards, Olivier Awards – became visible to a televised nation. In the mid-1960s, another key mechanism for bestowing high status – the UK’s state honours system – adapted to the rise of celebrity culture. The popularisation of the state honours system provided celebrities with access to the second major form of distinction underwriting national treasure status.

### *State Validation*

State honours provide the Queen, as the head of state, with a means of officially recognising and rewarding two main strands of contribution: service (public, community, voluntary) and distinction (excellence, achievement) (Phillips, 2004). Honours are conferred upon individuals who have made achievements in public life and/or committed themselves to serving and helping the nation (<https://www.gov.uk/honours>). An internal hierarchy and strict limits on the number of awards that can be made in any one year seek to ensure that the system is not devalued. <sup>1</sup>

The Royal seal of approval for celebrities ‘has a long pedigree’ (Public Administration Select Committee, 2004). Actor Henry Irving was the first ‘celebrity’ to receive a knighthood when he was honoured by Queen Victoria in 1895. He was followed by Ellen Terry and Sybil Thorndike. Laurence Olivier, knighted in 1947 at 40-years-old, became the youngest. Ralph Richardson also received his knighthood in 1947, with John Gielgud following in 1953. Peggy Ashcroft was made Dame in 1956. Olivier was elevated above fellow actor knights and

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<sup>1</sup> The honours system has a rich history of scandal and has come under periodic attack for being mired in allegations of cronyism and corruption.

dames in 1970 when he became the first actor to be awarded a life peerage and was created Baron Olivier of Brighton. State honouring of celebrities' contributions to the national arts and culture was – in keeping with the celebrity hierarchies of the time – reserved for seasoned thespians, and in any case remained marginal in an honours system that functioned primarily to reward lengthy state service. At the height of the 'swinging sixties', Harold Wilson's government reformed the honours system to ensure greater recognition for non-state service, and elevated the significance of contributions to national arts and culture across the spectrum of cultural tastes.

Thus, in June 1965 the Queen's Birthday Honours list was for the first time dominated by the cultural and creative industries. The world's most famous pop band, the Beatles, were controversially awarded MBEs. Despite initial complaints of debasement from traditionalists for whom pop music retained negative connotations, in the years that followed honouring celebrities became commonplace (Inglis, 2010). The reinvigorated state honours system coincided with the celebrification of the Royal Family (Brown, 2017; Warwick, 2017), recalibrating the relationship between royalty, the aristocracy and celebrity. It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that this was the year in which the first living Briton was designated a national treasure in the press, celebrating, as we have noted above, the 'Queen Mum' in an article that simultaneously sought to exalt and popularise the monarchy.

From the 1990s, the rapidly expanding media and advertising market reconfigured the system of representation within which celebrity images, meanings and identities circulated (Marshall, 1997). The result was the increasing visibility of celebrities and what several analysts view as the decline of meaningful distinctions in fame (Holmes, 2005). The tabloids, as Cashmore (2006) notes, had shattered the once respected boundaries between celebrities' public and private lives. It was now celebrities' all-too-human flaws and failures, unmasked through paparazzi 'gotcha' moments, that became the obsessive focus of media attention. 24/7 television and the rise of the internet generated a limitless need, globally, for entertainment and infotainment content. An expanding celebriscape offered new opportunities for countless wannabes to access and engage with the media, transforming the meaning of entertainment, fame and celebrity. Though researchers of celebrity culture have understood this period of change in different ways, there is broad consensus that the 1990s saw a marked shift in emphasis from celebrity based on achievement to celebrity

based primarily or solely on mass visibility (Couldry, 2003; Holmes & Jermyn, 2004; Rojek, 2001; Turner, 2006). There were of course still celebrity-icons who enjoyed enduring national or global fame and peer validation, but for a new generation of celebrities, talent mattered less than what they were prepared to do to be infamous for 15 seconds (Cashmore, 2006). In this context, the idea of the 'authentic' celebrity – for celebrities themselves, and for the national media – and the ability to re-impose meaningful status distinctions in fame took on critical importance (Hyde, 2009).

This was also the decade in which the British state honours system underwent its most significant reforms since the 1960s. Harper (2015) has noted the shifting prevalence of voluntary service and charitable work in the state honours system across the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The Order of the British Empire (OBE) was created after the first World War, for example, specifically to recognise voluntary service, but in practice was awarded more often in recognition of government or military service. It was not until the 1990s, under Conservative Prime Minister John Major, that rewarding public service as enacted through voluntary work and philanthropy became a priority once more. The aim was to make the honours system more meritocratic and to boost public participation in the nominations process. Wilson's reforms had contributed to popularising both the state honours system and the British monarchy. Major's reforms enhanced the credibility of both by reinforcing the monarchy's role as 'the leader of the voluntary sector and the authenticator of national honour', while at the same time uniting the interests of the royal family, politicians and the public around reforms that signalled a popular shift in the moral economy (Harper, 2015, p. 659).

The twin processes of popularisation and moralisation, in the context of a rapidly expanding celebrity culture, attempted to re-legitimate an honours system that was increasingly viewed as archaic. Celebrities who made extraordinary contributions to public service above and beyond achieving professional distinction could now accumulate the state validation required of national treasures. Thus, two systems of validation – peer and state – presented celebrities and the media with a crucial means of establishing distinction in an increasingly crowded, chaotic and devalued celebriscape. Yet even for these most talented and virtuous celebrities, there exists a third system of status distinction.

### *Media Validation*

Media exposure is the primary currency of celebrity. But media exposure can be positive or negative, destroying reputations and careers just as readily as it can build them. Media validation is different. This much rarer type of fame is based on a celebrity's ability to establish overwhelmingly positive relationships and attachments with the media (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Rojek, 2016). Those able to establish that they are not only exceptionally talented and hard-working, but also authentically scandal-free, can earn the national media's universal respect, admiration and affection (Greer & McLaughlin, 2013).

The combined and mutually reinforcing accumulation of all three forms of validation is crucial. The great majority of those honoured by the British state – more than 1000 each year – are unknown to the wider nation. Their public service may be phenomenal and duly recognised by the immediate beneficiaries of their good deeds and the honours committees that decide who deserves official recognition, but they lack the celebrity status required to be a national treasure. Conversely, there are Britons who are gold-plated celebrity-icons and lauded by their peers but whose public service has not been sufficient to attract the state validation required of national treasures. It is only through the accumulation, over decades, of the highest levels of peer, state and media validation that celebrities can be simultaneously elevated and sedimented as national treasures.

The two members of Britain's celebritocracy who most often top national treasure polls are naturalist and broadcaster Sir David Attenborough and actor Dame Judi Dench. For the remainder of this paper our focus will be on Dame Judi Dench who, according to the British Film Institute, most gracefully embodies the term 'national treasure'. The existing studies of Dench do not consider her metamorphosis into a national treasure and how she has reacted to this status designation (Funnell, 2015; McDonald, 2005; M. Williams, 2017). To analyse Dame Judi Dench's status transformation we have drawn upon numerous reviews, interviews, profiles and documentaries, as well as her filmography, autobiographies and biographies (Dench & Miller, 2011, 2014; Jacobs, 1986; Miller, 2002).

## **Dame Judi Dench: Anatomy of a very British National Treasure**

Born in the North Riding of Yorkshire on 9 December 1934, Judith Olivia Dench was the youngest of three children. Privately educated in York, both she and one of her brothers, who also became a professional actor, were exposed to theatre from an early age. Dench's father was the GP for York Theatre company and her mother was its wardrobe mistress. Like her brother before her, Dench studied at London's Central School for Speech Training and Dramatic Art, alongside Vanessa Redgrave, where she won the award for Outstanding Student.

From the moment in September 1957 when, at the age of 23, she made her professional debut as Ophelia, playing opposite John Neville as Hamlet, first in Nottingham and then at London's Old Vic, Judi Dench enjoyed 'a love affair with the critics who... smothered her not only with affection and praise but also with a kind of protection' (Morley, 1986, p.103). Her Broadway debut as Maria in *Twelfth Night* was followed by her performance as Juliet in Franco Zeffirelli's landmark 1960 production and as Anya in the 1961 Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) production of *The Cherry Orchard*. The reviews of the performances reinforced her emergent star status. From the 1960s Dench distinguished herself with trailblazing RSC and National Theatre interpretations of other great Shakespearian heroines. Refusing to be typecast, however, she also took on unexpected West End theatre roles such as Sally Bowles in the original 1968 London production of *Cabaret*.

Unusually for a classically trained actor of her generation, throughout her career Dench has demonstrated the rare ability to straddle both high and popular culture, taking on a diversity of television roles. It was the decision to star in two prime-time sitcoms, *A Fine Romance* (ITV) and *As Time Goes By* (BBC), that transformed her into a household name. The latter ran to four series, and earned Dench a *TV Times* readers' award as 'the actress we most wish to see more often on television'. It also widened her popular appeal. During this period, there are noticeably more cross-pollinating interviews and retrospective profiles across a range of media, all affirming the breadth and depth of Dench's fame and explaining her enduring appeal.

In the 1980s, leading roles in a string of critically acclaimed English literary films, including *A Room with a View*, consolidated Dench's position as one of Britain's most accomplished and

increasingly popular actors. She was propelled to international stardom from the mid-1990s through roles in Hollywood films that, crucially, also reinforced her quintessentially British identity. Unexpectedly being cast as 'M', the first female spymaster, in the James Bond films embedded Dench in Britain's most iconic film franchise. The rapid makeover into international stardom continued with her portrayal of Queen Victoria in *Mrs Brown*, the 1996 film that brought her first Oscar nomination for Best Actress. She then won the Best Supporting Actress for playing Queen Elizabeth I, in *Shakespeare in Love*. Dench returned to Broadway in April 1998 after a 40-year absence to rave reviews in David Hare's *Amy's View*. Her performance sealed her reputation as 'her country's greatest living actress' (*New York Times*, 1 November 1998, p.7). Proliferating rave reviews, profiles and interviews were accompanied by the publication of the first full biography of 'the first lady of British film and theatre' (see Miller, 1998). The focus now, however, was on how this 'Grand Dame' was re-defining the idea of what it meant to be an older, very stylish A-list Hollywood star (M. Williams, 2017). It is in this period that she also opened-up to the media about her personal life with husband, fellow actor, Michael Williams and their daughter, Finty, also an actor.

### *Peer Validation*

An unparalleled career, defined by Dench's desire to reinvent herself, has been recognised by her peers with an array of prestigious national and international awards, covering all entertainment media. In 2010, the oldest performing arts industry publication in the UK, *The Stage*, published the results of a 10-week readers' poll which concluded that Judi Dench, with her unmistakable voice, was Britain's greatest stage actor. For director Trevor Nunn, Dench:

...has the capacity to open herself and become a conduit for all our emotions and experiences and memories. We become unable to withhold ourselves from her. Nobody can be a great actor without being a great person, and Judi confirms this truth. Her generosity in giving of her time and her art for countless causes is the same generosity that makes us identify with her in performance. The word isn't selflessness, because she is so potently a guardian of ideals and values, in her work and her life, that underline her certainties. The word is genius, in all its

contradictions, complexity and fundamental humanity. Yes, genius, and something else (Nunn, 2004, p74).

The performance studio of the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama was renamed in honour of one of its most illustrious alumni and numerous universities have also awarded Dench honorary degrees.

### *State Validation*

Dench's biography notes that she has lent her patronage to 180 charities, relating primarily to the theatre and medical causes (Miller, 2002). She has also been a vocal campaigner for state support for Britain's theatrical arts. Her commitment to the artistic life of the nation resulted in the award of an OBE in 1970 and a Damehood in 1987, and in 2005 she became the only actress in history to be made a member of the Order of the Companions of Honour (OCH). Sitting above the honour of a Knighthood or Damehood, the OCH is 'awarded for having a major contribution to the arts, science, medicine, or government lasting over a long period of time'. The *Evening Standard* (13<sup>th</sup> June 2017) reported that 'some of Britain's best-loved national treasures' – including Dench (appointed OCH in 2005) and Attenborough (appointed OCH in 1996) – attended an event with the Queen to celebrate the award's centenary. Presiding over the ceremony at Hampton Court Palace, the Dean of HM Chapels Royal, the Right Reverend Richard Chartres, said:

This is not an order for celebrities who are simply well known for their well knownness. But practitioners in various fields with a sustained record of service of national importance... The order stands not merely for public achievements but for the kind of integrity and unshakeable commitment to principle, which comes from obeying a calling beyond our immediate self-interest. And this capacity to go beyond self-interest, to serve the greater good, begins with humility.

## *Media Validation*

In a 1995 ITV *South Bank Show* Special devoted to Dame Judi Dench, presenter and cultural commentator, Melvyn Bragg, noted the status transformation that was taking place:

Very few in Judi Dench's profession will have been able to take on the great challenging roles – Lady Macbeth or Cleopatra – then skip into TV and beguile us with dry comic timing. I am afraid she is in grave danger of becoming a national treasure. Some fear the moment has already arrived (*Daily Mail*, 29 October 1995).

A series of newspaper features reinforced the essence of Dench's rapidly evolving national treasure status:

It's that indefinable tingle factor in great performers, and I never experienced it more keenly than when she played Beatrice opposite Sir Donald Sinden in an RSC *Much Ado About Nothing* 20 years ago. That tingle factor is similarly renewed in *Mrs Brown*. No one who sees the film needs telling that Dame Judi is a national treasure, and no one will begrudge her whatever more fame and fortune comes her way as a result (*Daily Mail*, January 21, 1998).

In Japan eminent artists can be officially designated National Treasures... the title confirms that the individual in question is publicly and widely acknowledged as a supreme artist, venerated by all. No equivalent honour exists in Britain, but we override this lack by honouring certain people unofficially through a sort of unspoken consensus of desire. And there is little doubt that a name figuring on most lists would be that of Dame Judi Dench (*Times*, October 27, 2001).

She is amongst the greatest actors of her generation, no, any generation. She is one of the best things about Britain, up there with fish and chips, The Beatles and the NHS. She is basically like the Queen, only better. She has a wicked sense of humour. She has a voice as cracked and powerful as an earthquake. She is a national treasure. She is a Dame. Oh, and she has the most twinkly eyes in the business (*The Scotsman*, 14 February 2012)

Alongside Sir David Attenborough, 'Dench' has become the benchmark against which other celebrities evaluate their own status entitlement. When asked how she feels about being described as a national treasure, actor and 2019 Best Actress Oscar winner Olivia Coleman responds, 'Er... Is that my mum saying that? I'm not sure. It's flattering, but I feel I haven't earned that. I don't know what it means... Judi Dench and David Attenborough – they're national treasures. I feel slightly embarrassed that, at the moment, I'm not in their sphere.'

Powerless to prevent her designation as a national treasure, Dench has typically opted for a self-mocking stance. Sir Kenneth Branagh noted that 'During her ascendancy to national treasurehood, nobody has resisted her deification more than her' (*Sunday Times*, 8 November 2015). Dench herself has repeatedly defined the designation as a form of fossilisation: 'National treasure? I hate that. Too dusty, too in a cupboard, too behind glass, too staid' (*Times*, 11 December 2009). In a *New York Times* interview in 2017 she complained, 'It's horrible. I wish there was another word for it. I hate that. It's not just tedious. It's some old rock in a cupboard that the glass is shut on and nobody gets it out to dust it. I loathe it. I just want to be called a joker. A jobbing actor. Somebody who has a laugh.'" And an interview in the *Sunday Times* in August 2017 began:

'It was on September 9, 1957 that Judi Dench made her debut as Ophelia in the Old Vic's Hamlet. Over the six decades since, she has taken hundreds more roles, won dozens of awards and plaudits, and become embedded in the national psyche. What is the greatest misconception about her? A pause. "'National treasure,'" she purrs, in that distinctive Denchian croak. "F\*\*\*\*\* 'national treasure'!" (Mountain, 2017).

However, Geoffrey Palmer, her co-star in *As Time Goes By*, begs to differ: 'She will say that she doesn't enjoy being a national treasure, which would be an absolute lie! She loves it!' (*Daily Mail*, 21 December 2016). In playing with her status Dench has had a bling Swarovski crystal tattoo spelling out "007" on her neck when attending Bond galas and premieres and had *Carpe Diem* tattooed on the inside of her wrist for her 81st birthday. She has appeared in a video with London grime star Lethal Bizzle. As a fan of the 'ledge', Bizzle introduced the word 'dench' into London street slang in 2011, meaning 'Anything that is, like, incredible, anything that is amazing, anything that is overwhelming, anything that is hard. We don't say that, we say it's Dench'. In the video, Dench embraces her street persona, wearing a "Stay

Dench” baseball cap, answering to the name ‘Judi Dizzle’ and joining in the rap, ‘Anywhere I go gang rolling’.

If anything, Dench’s exasperated protestations against her national treasure status serve only to strengthen it. ‘Dame Judi Dench, national treasure’ has become so embedded in the common stock of cultural knowledge that it can form the basis for prime-time comedy. Tracy Ullman’s comedy sketch show (2017) included a character called ‘Evil Judi’, who uses a nefarious national treasure status to get away with petty criminal acts, such as shoplifting:

**Shopkeeper:** What was I thinking? Dame Judi Dench wouldn't shoplift. You're a national treasure.

**Evil Judi:** Exactly. And because I'm a national treasure, I could get away with anything. But, of course, I don't

More recently she has been nicknamed ‘Rudey Dench’ by *The Sun* newspaper for disclosing her response to a paramedic who had inquired as to whether she relied on a carer: “And I’m afraid I completely blew my top. I said ‘You f\*\*\* off! I’ve just done eight weeks of *The Winter’s Tale* at the Garrick Theatre.’ I was so angry.”

### **Why do National Treasures Matter?**

As the most high-status personalities in Britain’s celebritocracy, national treasures, such as Dame Judi Dench, are powerful signifiers of all that is claimed to be exceptional in the British national character. Validated by the interlocking centres of power and authority that constitute the fabric of British public life, national treasures become national institutions in themselves. Like all national institutions, they undertake important ideological work.

First, as celebrities judged to have led exemplary lives, national treasures are presented as role models for the nation. As we have noted above, this elite status designation is only sedimented after years of relentless vetting. In underwriting their exemplary status, their peers, the state and the media are guaranteeing that national treasures are authentically scandal-free and, to varying degrees, accepting the risk of reputational damage should it transpire they are not. While state honours vetting remains a notoriously secretive affair

(Phillips, 2004), the media vetting of a potential national treasure's probity plays out in the full glare of publicity. However talented and virtuous a celebrity may appear, a scandalous news feed will go viral in a hyper-connected world (Greer & Mclaughlin, 2015, 2017b). By surviving decades in the spotlight with their reputations intact, national treasures establish a rare positive consensus across a national media typically characterised by a 'gotcha' impulse to shred reputations (Cashmore, 2006; Greer & Mclaughlin, 2017a; Lloyd, 2004). Of the National Treasure competition run with the British Library, *Sunday Telegraph* editor, Ian MacGregor, said: 'There is so much bleak news at the moment, but this has been a great opportunity to celebrate some truly wonderful British achievements.' (*Telegraph*, September 18, 2008).

Second, national treasures are a source of national pride. They contribute to reproducing an idealised national identity by presenting the nation to itself in a way that reflects how the nation imagines itself to be and wants to be represented (Barnes, 2012). In so doing, they are integral to the scripting of the national story (Hall, 1999). National treasures function symbolically to reproduce Britain's intangible cultural heritage through providing loci of identification and a sense of continuity across the generations. They embody both the reassuring stability of tradition and the exhilarating possibilities of cultural renewal and reinvention (R. Williams, 1989; Willis, 1990). Like all treasured possessions, they are not only celebrated, but also jealously protected against attack. As Billig (1992, p. 34) has argued, disparagement of a national institution is 'an attack upon the fundamental uniqueness of the nation'. And 'if 'our' selves are equivalent with the nation, then the attack is also a threat to the unique identity of 'our' national selves'.

Third, national treasures reproduce the myth of meritocracy (Littler, 2017). National treasurehood is a transcendent status that appears magically to dissolve the social inequalities that define British society. National treasures are presented as the meritocratic embodiment of authentic celebrity – achieved through extraordinary talent, hard work and determination – and the Great Briton – characterised by exemplary citizenship.

Seemingly gender-blind, it is significant that Britain's greatest living national treasure and the empirical focus of our analysis is a woman. The Queen, the Queen Mother, Princess Diana and Lady Margaret Thatcher have all been declared national treasures. And yet,

notwithstanding this gender diversity, national treasures, the peers who award them, the establishment members who honour them, and the journalists who celebrate them, mostly share similar backgrounds. The cultural and creative industries are marked by the not so 'hidden injuries' associated with multiple forms of exclusion (Brook, O'Brien, & Taylor, 2018; Friedman & Laurison, 2019; Friedman & O'Brien, 2017). Those who believe most strongly that the system functions meritocratically are those in the most privileged positions – white males in the highest paid jobs – indicating that those best placed to address structural inequality are least likely to recognise it as a problem (Taylor & O'Brien, 2017). Despite repeated attempts to democratise the state honours system, Sir Hayden Phillips' (2004) review – ten years after Prime Minister John Major's overhaul – identified a continuing lack of diversity. The honours selection committees were overwhelmingly comprised of white men and four-fifths of higher honours went to white men. A decade later, in 2015, although more women than men were honoured overall (51%), five-times more men than women were knighted, and only 7% of all honours went to ethnic minorities (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/jun/12/queens-birthday-honours-list-knights-outnumber-dames-five-to-one>). Successive surveys of UK journalism have noted its default 'pale, male and posh' composition, variously finding that it is 94% white and 55% male, with 51% of leading journalists and 80% of editors being privately educated, and only 11% of journalists coming from working-class backgrounds (Martinson, 2018; Social Mobility Commission, 2016).

And therein lies the paradox of national treasures. They have nothing and everything to do with demarcating the structural inequalities that define British society. Those already-elite members of the celebritocracy who are designated national treasures become sedimented in the nation's psyche as unifying expressions of British identity that supposedly rise above social divisions. But the processes through which Britons like Dame Judi Dench and Sir David Attenborough become a class apart are part of a patronage system that limits social mobility and the chances of success based on talent, hard work and dedication. It is not our intention to suggest that national treasures are willingly or even knowingly complicit in the reproduction of inequalities. For one, the status designation is a media construction that is applied by journalists and other elite actors, whether or not it may also be actively sought by eminent celebrities. National treasures such as Dench and Attenborough are so-

designated without consultation or permission, whether they like it or not. Further, as Judi Dench clearly demonstrates, the label can be forcefully resisted by those members of the celebritocracy to whom it is applied. Nevertheless, whatever their personal preferences, predilections or politics, the intertwined status sedimentation processes through which celebrities become designated as national treasures connive to naturalise the hierarchies of distinction that lie at the core of Britain's cultural and creative industries.

## **Conclusions**

We have undertaken the first analysis of the hitherto neglected elite status designation of British national treasure, a media term of endearment that has a remarkable resonance in contemporary British culture. National treasures such as Dame Judi Dench are celebrities who have been awarded at the highest level by their peers, honoured at the highest level by the state, and sedimented in the media's affections. In an ever-more congested and chaotic entertainment marketplace, the members of this exclusive class apart are acclaimed for their gravitas, superseding fashions and fads and transcending their contemporaries in the Great British hall of fame. In life and in death, tributes will celebrate their exemplary lives and treasured contributions to the cultural life of the nation.

Although the term national treasure for many – including those so-designated – may seem trite, as an ideological assemblage it is in fact invested with significance. Class and racial divisions and status hierarchies are reproduced and institutionalized via the evocation of this ostensibly transcendent status. Periodic deliberations about who is and is not a national treasure provide intriguing insights into 'state of the nation' thinking about what true British celebrity and, equally importantly, what true British 'class' looks like. In the UK context, therefore, there is important research to be conducted on the dynamics of the British celebritocracy. There is a need to analyse the different biographical pathways to becoming a national treasure. 'Dench's actor pathway is different to that of 'Attenborough', the naturalist and broadcaster. The status elevation and sedimentation processes producing the the next generation of 'national treasures' – for example, Olivia Coleman, Emma Thompson, Lenny Henry? – should also be researched to gain insights into the possibilities for a more diverse conceptualization of cultural distinction in Britain. In the international context,

research on other national celebritocracies could examine whether there are comparable 'national treasure' dynamics underpinning elite celebrity status transformation. So expanded, the study of national treasures can also make a valuable contribution to extending the research agenda on elite status hierarchies.

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